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ABSTRACT

From 1946 to 1976, the field of higher education operated in a growth-based mode, encouraged by government decisions and financed by government funds. During the massive recession and exploding federal deficits of the early seventies, however, legislators began examining the real value of higher education, and asking whether higher education was worth its cost. As a result, colleges have been forced to seek new methods of proving the quality of their educational product. One method, evaluation through exit testing, and in particular Florida's College Level Academic Skills Program/Test (CLASP/CLAST), has directly effected the subject matter taught in the college classroom. In concept, the CLASP/CLAST tested 59 communications skills and 56 computation skills that every college student should master during the first 2 years of college to ensure that the college was doing its job. In reality, however, the results of the CLAST have been used to rank institutions. Though two- and four-year college faculty were heavily involved in identifying the skills to be tested, developing the CLAST instrument, and establishing cut-off scores, the end result of the CLASP was to establish state government control over the content of education in Florida. CLASP/CLAST has had positive effects in a number of areas, including student gains in measured competencies, increased articulation between institutions, and the improvement of the reputation of the community college system and accompanying increase in public confidence. On the other hand, critics point to negative consequences, including the tendency to view CLAST scores as predictors of upper division performance, the redirection of resources and objectives toward a single examination which has limited the breadth of educational experience in the lower division, and the inherent unfairness of passing a student through an educational system for 2 years, then denying him/her a diploma because of one examination. (EJV)

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EXCELLENCE THROUGH EXIT EVALUATION: THE FLORIDA EXPERIMENT

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"We live in a society where we go about counting and measuring everything, whether it exists or not."

John Nickens [4]

In the history of American higher education, the two decades from 1955-1975 will be remembered as the Era of Expansion. If current trends hold true, the following two decades will be known as the Age of Evaluation.

A quick comparison of 1986 education journals with those of a decade before tells the story. Topics such as student rights, flexible curriculum, equal opportunity, and coping with growth have nearly vanished. In their place are articles on entrance standards, accountability, employability of graduates, instructional evaluation, and exit standards.

In ten years a quiet revolution has taken place in higher education in the United States. It is wider and more profound than the loudly-proclaimed "student revoluation" of the seventies. This revolution seeks definitions for the product of higher education and methods of measuring the quality of that product. The buzz words of this revolution are "quality" and "excellence". The weapons are techniques and instruments of statistical evaluation.

Roots of a Revolution

There are fewer human endeavors more noble than the search for excellence. Self-improvement, the search for individual or institutional excellence is the very heart of education. One would assume that the quest for excellence was an on-going process in any reputable college or university. So why the sudden stir?

For the answer we must glance backward at the history of American higher education since World War II. Before the war, college education was not within the reach of the average American. For the most part, it belonged to two classes of citizens, the very wealthy and the intellectual. In this relatively cloistered world, colleges and universities were elitist institutions, enjoying a relative immunity from public or governmental scrutiny. Then came the GI bill.

In a few months the student population of many American universities quadrupled. Higher education did a monumental job of expansion, and government, caught in the tide of history, financed the entire operation.

In a more reasoned time, government would have tred cautiously toward such a massive expansion. Studies would have been commissioned, statistics compiled, and regulations drafted. In the heat of the moment, however, college populations and budgets were allowed to skyrocket, based on several unproven assumptions:

1) A higher education insures a better way of life for the individual and the nation.

2) Colleges will enforce their traditional standards to assure the quality of graduates.

3) An expanding economy will provide the funds for future growth in higher education.

The last forty years have shown that those assumptions were, at best, naive.

Between 1946 and 1976 higher education continued to grow at staggering rate. The majority of this growth was encouraged by government decisions and financed by government funds. Some of the causative factors were:

1) Equal opportunity for minority populations, previously barred from the mainstream of higher education.

2) The woman's movement, with its emphasis on better education and employment for women.

3) Financial aid from state and federal sources.

4) Increased demand for a college degree as a pre-condition for employment.

5) The Veterans of two ground wars in Southern Asia.

6) Relaxed admission policies--especially the open door programs of the community college.

Then came the massive recession and exploding federal deficits of the early 1970's. All at once, legislators began to ask, "Is higher education really worth the money?"

To many educators, this question was totally unexpected. They had been operating in a growth-based mode for their whole career, struggling to create enough product to meet the demand. Now, suddenly, legislators wanted to know if the product had any value.

Legislators, it seemed, wanted to look at higher education like a used car: Is it fuel efficient? What is the resale value?

This, then, is the real basis for the "revolution of excellence" in higher education. Despite the internal studies, it is not a home grown movement within institutions. It is, instead, a reaction to public and legislative pressures for an accounting of where their scarce tax dollars are going.

The kinds of proof demanded are not those traditionally cited by colleges and universities. The values to society of liberally educated individuals cannot be graphed for a legislative committee. Advances in human thought defy statistical analysis.

In the absence of these traditional values, colleges have been forced to seek new methods of proving the quality of their educational product. These evaluation techniques have directly effected the subject matter that is taught in college classrooms.

Nowhere is this effect more dramatic than in evaluation through exit testing. For the remainder of this paper, we will look at America's grandest attempt at exit testing, the College Level Academic Skills Program/Test (CLASP/CLAST) in Florida.

The Mandate

The Concept is exquisitely simple. Educators from throughout the state of Florida would get together and compile list of skills that every college student should master during his/her first two years. Afterwards, students would be tested on these skills and "presto" we would know if the colleges and their students were doing their job.

The reality, however, was far from simple. Indeed, in 1979 when the Florida legislature instructed the Department of Education (DOE) to create a list of skills, many educators were horrified. Big brother was finally reaching into their classroom, spelling an end to academic freedom in Florida.

For other educators, the problem was more pragmatic. It seemed impossible to get thousands of math, English and reading teachers from 39 institutions to agree on a single list of skills. "They said it would never fly." says Ernest Ross, a developer of CLASP. [7]

Seven years later, the CLASP and its accompanying test are flying right on schedule. The direction and implications of that flight, however, are a cause of growing debate among educators and administrators throughout the state.

Defining Excellence

Nowhere in the legislation or guidelines for the

creation of CLASP did this writer find the word "excellence". In concept, the CLASP/CLAST did not attempt to evaluate the whole educational experience, but simply a list of basics. In a sense, it was designed to measure adequacy, not excellence.

In reality, however, the results of CLAST administrations have been used from the very beginning to rank institutions. Their steady rise has been given as concrete proof of a movement toward excellence throughout the Florida system. Intended or not, when Florida defined the CLASP skills, it was placing an objective, statistically verifiable definition on educational excellence.

Regardless of their position on the issue, few educators would disagree that a monumental effort was made to involve faculty, statewide, in the development of CLASP skills.

"Most of us were dragged in, kicking and screaming." says Sylvia Holladay of the State CLAST Task Force. [7] Like many detractors, however, she soon realized that the handwriting was on the wall. The legislature seriously intended to require exit testing for sophomores. Furthermore, they intended to insure that these testable skills were being taught.

The legislation was clear. The DOE was responsible for:

1) "Approving the list of communication and computation skills.
2) Approving tests to measure achievment of those skills.
3) Setting performance standards."

Faculty members could either pitch-in with the development of the crucial list of skills, or simply live with whatever DOE produced. Under this gentle coercement, nearly 1200 faculty members from colleges and universities joined in the search for the CLASP competencies.

Based on faculty input, a list proposed by a statewide task force was pruned to 59 communication skills and 56 computation skills.

The confusion and disagreement, predicted by early detractors, never materialized. Of the 60 suggested communication competencies (skills), all received approval ratings of over 70 percent. (One listening competencey was late dropped because of measurement difficulties.)

Of 65 proposed computation competencies, 56 received high ratings and were adopted. [10]

The Evaluation Instrument

Florida now had an objective definition of college level skills but no way to measure them.

If Florida faculty agreed on acceptable skills, the nation's testing services seemed to hold different opinions.

The DOE's CLASP office reviewed 120 testing instruments in communications and computation and found each one lacking in major areas of the 115 CLASP competencies. The state had built its own definition of excellence; it must build its own instrument to measure that excellence. Furthermore, it must meet a 1982 deadline, handed down by the legislature.

Once again, faculty were key contributors to the process. Faculty members at the University of Florida and the University of South Florida were contracted to create test items. To meet the time constraints, items for the original test covered only 11 reading, 24 writing and 36 computation skills.

To guard against institutional bias, the resulting items were reviewed by university and community college faculty from throughout the state. Items were also ested on 30 students. Items were revised based on this student/faculty input.

The revision resulted in a list of 158 communication and 140 computation items. These were field tested on 2733 students. Ten essay questions were tested on 862 students.

After final revisions, based on the field tests, the original CLAST was ready. It consisted of three booklets, with a testing time of 3 hours 45 minutes. Included were subtests in computation, reading and writing, plus an essay. [9]

Standards of Excellence

There's a peculiar thing about excellence: everybody can't achieve it. Exclusion is inherent in the concept. If everybody reaches excellence, it becomes mediocrity.

Although the term was never mentioned, once again CLASP/CLAST set out to measure excellence. This time the method was exclusion. A cut-off level had to be found. Students who fell below this level would be denied an AA degree, even if they had successfully completed all course work. By compiling the percentage of students who achieved scores above the cut-off level, the state could guage "excellence".

Once again, faculty and students were involved in the process. Each AA degree candidate and upper division candidate in Florida was required to sit for the CLAST, beginning in the fall of 1982. Although taking the test was a requirement, no minimum score was required before August 1, 1984. Test scores were used for student counseling and to adjust the college curriculum to meet the demands of CLASP.

After the first test, college and university faculty made recommendations for cut-off scores. These recommendations were often naive according to Jeaninne Webb, of the University of Florida. After examining faculty

suggestions, the UF panel found that they would "devastate minority students". [7]

Dr. Webb's comment, points up an essential flaw in the development and use of the CLASP/CLAST program: No one has defined the term "College Level Academic Skills". Depending on the context, it seems to have either of the following definitions:

Definition #1- The skills necessary to participate in the upper division of a Florida University.

Definition #2- A set of skills that are the mark of a college educated person.

Although they sound similar at first reading, these two definitions may not be closely connected. Some upper division majors, for example, may not require any computation skills beyond simple addition. Others may require little or no essay ability.

The fact that UF revised faculty recommendations to reflect Definition #1, seems to support that definition. The rhetoric in DOE publications, however, points to the second definition. Much of the confusion that surrounds the meaning of CLAST scores, results from this ambiguity.

In the end, a blue ribbon panel used the institutional recommendations to set statewide minimum standards. Florida was ready to implement sophomore exit testing.

Teaching the Test

It is one thing to test for skills. To assure that each one of those competencies is taught is a much larger task. This was the effort is best defined in a college catalog of the time:

"The 1979 Florida legislature passed a bill known as House Bill 1689, comprised of a variety of statutory changes concerning post-secondary education. Among the changes where a series of new provisions intended to produce the specification of college level communication and computation skills...The college has modified its instructional program to the extent necessary to assure the attainment of these skills. The entire program has been named CLASP..." [11]

One good reason for CLASP was the threat of litigation. When students are denied a diploma because of skill deficiencies, the college must be able to clearly demonstrate where those skills were taught or risk legal action.

The overwhelming reason for CLASP, however, was government's desire to quantify higher education. Just as the Lyndon Johnson administration quantified "victory" with body counts, CLASP quantified "excellence" with word counts.

Writing requirements of 6,000 words per subject were tacked onto courses in English, sciences, humanities.

Less visably, communication and math departments began to analyze their syllabi for evidence of CLASP skills. Individual classes were molded to conform with the statewide model specified by the exacting CLASP competencies.

Son of CLAST

After governmental control of instruction and graduation the only unregulated facet of the Community College Associate of Arts degree was admission.

The community college movement was founded upon the concept of "open door" admission. Under this policy, any high school graduate has the right to begin a community college degree program. With CLASP/CLAST in place the Florida legislature moved to shut the "open door".

Statewide placement tests were approved for entering freshmen in Florida community colleges and minimum scores were established. Students falling below these cut-off levels in individual tests are channeled into remedial courses which do not carry academic credit.

From entrance through exit, state government had established exacting controls over the content of education in Florida.

The Positive

The first two years of CLAST enforcement has come and gone. The test and accompanying programs are not a part of the Florida system of higher education. They have been submitted to unprecedented scrutiny at every level of development.

"When what is tested, how it is tested and levels of student performance are acceptable, on what basis could it be said that a statewide testing program is not a sound idea?" asks Myron R. Blee, manager of DOE's CLASP office.

Blee could have added that test scores have risen significantly since 1982, showing student gains in all measured competencies. If test scores are any indication, the CLASP is a success, at least in the short run.

The program has also had a positive effect in institutional articulation, "enhancing conditions as students transfer from one institution to another!" For the first time, students at Key West Community College are guaranteed exposure to the same skills s freshmen and sophomores at the Florida State University, 700 miles away.

Enforcable standards and statewide articulation have had a positive effect on the reputation of the Florida Community College system. The myth that community colleges are second-rate institutions has been consigned to the scrap pile of history. This effect is reinforced by the steadily rising test scores of community college sophomores, only slightly below the average scores of their university counterparts.

Because of CLASP, Florida faculty have been forced to police themselves. Faculty have been forced to "review their own expectations of students as well as their instructional materials and methodology". [1]

The accompanying entrance testing has allowed community colleges to channel unprepared students out of regular freshman classes. Although no results are yet available, this may have a positive impact on attrition rates. By enhancing the homogeneity of freshman classes, it should greatly improve the breadth of instruction.

CLAST data is helping academic departments fine tune their instruction. Information on student success is available for each question on the examination. Each question can be cross referenced to a specific skill. Never before has this kind of student output information been so closely tied to skill objectives.

The CLAST data arrived as the same moment in history as the computer technology necessary to make optimum use of its results. The product of this alliance is thorough profile of the performance of each college and university in the instruction of 80 basic skills. Changes in student performance, resulting from CLASP curriculum changes, can be monitored as they take place.

Finally, the CLASP program has restored public confidence in the validity of certificates and degrees. Employers are assured that any Florida Associate of Arts graduate has mastered certain essential skills.

Under CLASP/CLAST a degree is no longer simply a "piece of paper". It is a definite set of competencies.

The Negative

"Exit testing has no value to the student, and because of the time between delivery and assessment, little value for instructional improvement." says John Nickens of the Educational Leadership Department, University of Florida.

Despite all the interesting side effects, cited by proponents, many educators question the need and validity of a sophomore exit examination. "What are the real objectives of the CLAST?" they ask. The answers are not readily forthcoming.

One possibility is that CLAST predicts success in upper division courses. Since it is the gatekeeper of the upper division in Florida, this assumption is understandable. Statistics, however, do not bear out this correlation. In fact, the majority of community college students who failed CLAST in 1983 and proceeded to the state universities have maintained satisfactory grade averages.

"CLAST was not designed to be a predictive test." says Nickens. If not, why has it been dropped in the dead center of the road to the upper division.

Critics also point with alarm at the uses of CLAST scores. From the very first, test scores ranked colleges and universities individually and by region. The serious search for educational standards had turned into horse race. Presidents and public relations officers eagerly awaited the latest posting of scores. The race for CLAST excellence was on.

There are many excellent ways of raising test scores that have little to do with "excellence". Colleges and universities became rapidly sophisticated in these methods, including "special classes, seminars, help sessions, pre-testing and remediation".

Colleges didn't try to hide their efforts to teach the test. Under the new morality of CLAST, any legal means of raising scores was laudable. "I.Q is what Binet measures. Quality is what the exit exam measures," seemed to be the message from DOE. [5]

In the view of many, this redirecting of institutional resources and objectives toward a single examination has seriously limited the breadth of educational experience in the lower division.

The "Son of CLAST" entrance testing seems directly contradictory to the open door policy of the community college movement. The culturally deprived student who saw the community college as his/her road to upward social mobility, now finds that highway solidly blocked by placement tests. A student may face years of remediation, "not because they cannot pass the coursework, but because they cannot meet the criteria for placement in college level programs."

A single exit test doesn't help the student correct deficiencies, say the opponents, because it takes place at the end of the two year process. "If there must be evaluation external to the colleges, should this evaluation not be incorporated into the courses that a student must pass?" [5]

There is something inherently unfair about providing passing indicators during two years of college, then denying diploma because of one examination.

Finally, CLAST's own results speak against the program. If we accept the test standards, there is no major problem with academic skills among Florida sophomores. Those few who fell below he mark have fared much better on retakes. The predicted wave of suits, claiming that CLASP skills had not been taught, has not materialized. In essence, Florida sophomores were getting a quality education all along.

In this view, the legislature has invested thousands of man hours and millions of dollars to fix a system that wasn't broken.

Overall Evaluation

There are some in the educational community who say that CLAST has served no useful purpose. This view overlooks the obvious.

If nothing else, CLASP/CLAST has forced educators from throughout the state to talk to each other, compare expectations, and discuss techniques. From an articulation standpoint, the program has been a success.

Has it improved the quality of education in Florida? The answer is, conclusively, "no". It has limited the breadth of lower division education and restricted the creative interaction between student and teacher that is a traditional part of the college experience.

Do CLAST scores have any real relationship to the educational product? Probably not.

If, on the other hand, one views CLASP/CLAST as a mechanism for projecting legislative control into the operation of college classrooms, it has served its purpose well.

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